

MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1968

VOL. 23, NO. 3

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

AFFAIR OF DEATH

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Silent, hidden, a man who killed women waited for his next victim. Who was he? And who would be next to die? Only Mike Shayne guessed—and dared to bait a trap which could only too well cost him his own life.

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 23, No. 3, August, 1968. Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. 56 W. 45th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036. Subscriptions, One Year (12 issues) \$6.00; Two Years (24 issues) \$12.00; single copies 50¢. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1968, by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright conventions. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 56 W. 45th Street, New York, New York. 10036.

*I had a simple little
job to do. I only had
to put over a crime
that couldn't happen!*

Pearls Before Wine

by
**JACK
RITCHIE**



DIANA SIGHED. "I know it's a desperate measure, Henry," my wife said, "but why don't you consider that job with Uncle Wilfred? He's really quite fond of you and it is an executive position."

I shook my head. "I will not cadge upon your relatives. I much prefer to collect the insurance on your pearls." I lit a cigar. "I shall invite Detective Inspector Murdock, of course."

"The one who has such trouble with his grammar?"

"But nevertheless a brilliant mind. And that is exactly what we want in this case—a brilliant mind absolutely stymied. We will also invite a half a dozen of our usual dinner guests and Edwin Porson."

Diana frowned thoughtfully. "Edwin Porson? I don't believe I ever heard of him."

"Of course not. I myself have

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barely a nodding acquaintance with him at the club. However we really do need his presence. He was one of Mrs. Olliphant's house guests when her safe was looted."

Diana smiled. "Ah, I see what you're up to, Henry. You don't want any of our friends suspected when my pearls disappear."

"Exactly. I prefer the burden of guilt to fall upon a relative stranger."

"Do you suppose anyone will notice that I'm not wearing the genuine pearls?"

"Of course not, my dear. Only an expert can tell the genuine from the imitation and then only after a thorough examination, possibly even X-rays."

I smiled. "To recapitulate. We will be dining and I shall see to it that Jones finds it necessary to go to the cabinet for the red port. When he turns on the small lamp, it will cause a short-circuit and throw the room into total darkness."

Diana nodded. "I will immediately slip off my pearls and hand them to you."

"Right. And as soon as there is sufficient illumination again, you will scream and announce that your pearls are missing."

Thursday evening came and during the beef course, Jones went to the sideboard and pressed the lamp switch. There was a crackle, some sparks, and every light in the room went out.

Diana slipped the pearls into my

hand and I raised my voice. "Jones, I believe there are some candles on the sideboard."

Jones struck a match and proceeded to light the candelabra.

My wife clutched her throat and screamed. "My pearls! They've been stolen!"

Inspector Murdock rose and backed against the closed doors. "Don't nobody leave."

He opened one of the doors just slightly, attracted the attention of an outside servant and directed him to phone the police and see to the fuse box in the basement.

Light was restored shortly and the police arrived.

Murdock quickly ascertained a number of essentials and then spoke. "There are only two ways to get those pearls out of this room. But those French windows are locked and as far as the doorway is concerned, if anybody had opened one of the doors even a little, we would have all noticed it because while it was pitch dark inside here, the light in the next room was still bright."

Murdock's eyes went about the room. "In other words, them pearls—and the thief—are still in this room."

I was one of the first to be led out of the room and thoroughly searched. Of course nothing was found.

When I returned to the dining room, Edwin Porson was escorted out for his turn.



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I was about to drop the information to Murdock that Porson had been one of Mrs. Olliphant's house guests, when my wife reached for the sugar bowl and her arm brushed against my water glass.

It tipped over.

My first impulse was to reach for a napkin and my second to swear. Both of them would have been futile.

Instead, we watched as the acid instantly ate through the table cloth and began working on the wood.

Murdock frowned.

My wife managed to laugh lightly. "I just remembered. I wasn't wearing my real pearls tonight. Just the imitations."

It was some fifteen minutes later that Murdock announced that with the help of one of his detectives he had solved everything. "Porson dropped the pearls into the acid and they dissolved."

"Why should he do that?" my wife asked.

"Because he was cornered," Murdock said. "And he had that acid handy for just such an emergency."

"But he denies taking them," Diana said.

Murdock smiled. "It doesn't matter. Like you said, the pearls were imitations and we couldn't put him away for long for something like that anyway. No, it's lucky one of my boys remembered the description of the cuff links."

I was still a bit dazed at the sud-

den turn of events. "So you maintain that Edwin Porson not only stole the Olliphant jewelry, but he had the gall to wear Mr. Olliphant's cuff links to my house?"

I cleared my throat. "And he also had the sneaky presence of mind to push his glass of acid in front of me in an attempt to divert suspicion from himself?"

Murdock nodded.

When he was gone, I turned to Diana. "Why the devil did you have to blurt out that the pearls were just imitations? We could still have collected the insurance."

"I'm sorry," Diana said. "But I thought Murdock really had you when I spilled your acid. I tried to soften the crime, so to speak."

I sighed. "When Murdock's eyes went over all of us a while back, I felt just like—well, like a thief."

"I know, dear," she said. She reached for the sugar again without spilling anything this time. "It's really a very fine executive job, Henry. And Uncle Wilfred wouldn't mind if you took off now and then for a round of golf."

I nodded. "Perhaps everything turned out for the best. I'll see him first thing in—" I stared at her. Had she deliberately over-turned—

Impossible.

But nevertheless I had the feeling that whenever the subject of pearls—or acid—entered our conversation in the future, Diana would look all innocence.

Just as now.

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